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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TEGUCIGALPA 001119

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [HO](#)

SUBJECT: HONDURAS ELECTIONS: WHAT WE ARE WATCHING

REF: A. TEGUCIGALPA 866

[1](#)B. TEGUCIGALPA 851

[1](#)C. TEGUCIGALPA 806

[1](#)D. TEGUCIGALPA 799

[1](#)E. TEGUCIGALPA 724

[1](#)F. TEGUCIGALPA 723

[1](#)G. TEGUCIGALPA 594

Classified By: Ambassador Hugo Llorens, reasons 1.4 (b and d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Due to the political crisis, the Honduran election season has effectively been truncated to a one-month campaign period from the signing of the Tegucigalpa/San Jose Agreement October 30 to election day November 29. The crisis has changed the elections landscape in many ways, most visibly by propelling National Party (NP) candidate Porfirio "Pepe" Lobo into a double-digit lead over the pre-coup frontrunner, Liberal Party (LP) candidate Elvin Santos, and by forcing all the candidates to address the crisis as the number one topic of concern. The political parties have all been affected by the crisis and social upheaval of the past six months, both in terms of platforms and structure. Other key factors in the elections are voter participation; the anti-coup "resistance," which continues to threaten to disrupt the election; technical progress of the elections process; and the influence of civil society. Finally, congressional and municipal elections will influence the political landscape for the coming years and inform us of how the crisis has changed Honduran society. These factors will be the focus of Post's reporting in a compressed election season, and this cable is intended to provide a framework for that reporting. End summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Before the June 28 coup d'etat, which at its core was an internal schism within the ruling Liberal Party, LP candidate Elvin Santos enjoyed a comfortable lead over his main opponent, NP candidate Pepe Lobo. The coup reversed these roles (Refs E, F, and G), but also propelled left-wing independent candidate Carlos H. Reyes into a more prominent position due to his vocal opposition to the coup, with some observers predicting Reyes coming in a strong third place with over 10 percent of the vote (Ref B). All six presidential candidates have had to rethink their strategies in the face of the crisis, and the four "mainstream" candidates found themselves standing together to call for a resolution of the crisis. The remaining two have called for a boycott of the elections if Zelaya is not restored to office. While it is almost certain that either Santos or Lobo will be elected, and their formal policies are virtually indistinguishable on most issues important to the United

States, the nature of their presidencies would be different and therefore would effect how we approach each one. In addition to the usual reporting on the various candidates, their positions, and how they would effect U.S.-Honduras relations, Post intends to report on the shift in the candidates' roles and strategies in relation to the crisis, and how they have responded to the overall changes in the political landscape.

13. (C) Likewise the political parties have been changed significantly by the crisis. No one expects the 2010 elections to be business as usual, where a decades-old pact between the two dominant parties to alternate control would decide the outcome. The Liberal Party, which had control of the presidency and the Congress for the past four years, now finds itself split between the left-wing movement that was led by President Zelaya and the old-line, who carried out a coup against him and were represented by de facto regime leader Roberto Micheletti. Because of the LP schism, the National Party has become the largest unified voting bloc in Congress, and is on track to gain the Presidential Palace in the elections. Smaller parties have moved to capitalize on the shakeup of traditional politics, some realigning to gain favor with the disaffected left wing or more moderate Liberals.

14. (C) In the past three election cycles, voter turnout for elections has steadily dropped, and pre-coup indicators had suggested the trend would continue in 2010. But since the June 28 coup and the ensuing political crisis, there are anecdotal reports suggesting a significant change in the attitude of potential voters with citizens frustrated by the

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country's situation expressing this by abstaining (Refs C and D). However, there is a significant number of young citizens who will be eligible to vote for the first time in 2010 (Note: The GOH official figure is over 600,000 in a country with a total population of approximately eight million. End note). While this group traditionally either did not vote or simply followed the patterns of their family, there is evidence that they are both energized to participate and doing so in a way independent of their elders.

15. (C) Even before the coup, President Zelaya had attempted to tap into and activate a potential well of disaffected voters through his populist Citizen Power movement, albeit with limited success. The June coup arguably did more to awaken this movement, as many citizens who were not necessarily in favor of Zelaya's policies joined Zelaya partisans in the resistance movement against the coup and the de facto regime that took power. This resistance has now taken on a life of its own, and has the potential first to disrupt elections even if the international community supports them as legitimate and to become a lasting left-leaning political force in a country that has previously been one of the most traditionalist and conservative in Latin America. While it is unlikely the resistance can disrupt elections nationwide, if the resistance is able to create problems in key "hot spots," they could potentially skew the overall outcome enough to raise questions about the elections' validity. Post will explore how the movement intends to approach elections as the Tegucigalpa/San Jose Agreement is implemented, what influence they can have on the government's ability to hold elections, and whether they have any candidates who could be long-term standard bearers for their movement.

16. (C) The crisis and the loss of international donor support to the GOH bodies that must carry out elections raises concern over whether they can now carry out the logistics of national elections. Key questions to address in our reporting will be the ability to recruit and train poll workers, issuance of voter ID cards and workers' credentials, and the technical aspects of reporting and tabulating results. Furthermore, the existence of an independent

presidential candidate obligates the elections authorities to provide representatives for the candidate at any polling places where his movement lacks the resources to do so, adding cost and potential for manipulation. Also important to watch will be the role of the Armed Forces in delivering and protecting voting materials to areas where the resistance is strongest.

¶17. (C) Congressional and municipal elections will likewise have an influence on the future of Honduran politics and policy, as well as the U.S.-Honduras relationship. Given the LP schism, the makeup of the Congress could be significantly different than in the past, and the smaller parties have the potential for more influence than ever before. The crisis has called into question previously secure seats, both for the parties and for senior legislators. Other senior figures are not candidates in the race, and new congressional leadership will likely emerge and influence national policy on a range of issues important to U.S. interests. Municipal elections are also where individuals can wield political influence without a strong national movement behind them. Furthermore, voter dissatisfaction with national politics and leaders may mean local politics will play an increased role in the national political and social discourse. Narcotraffickers are also believed to exercise growing influence on a number of congressional and local elections, making them especially important to monitor. There is also the potential of a large proportion of voting age citizens choosing to stay away from the polls in protest of the coup.

¶18. (C) In addition to individual candidates and formal political parties, civil society organizations and NGOs have long held influence in Honduran politics and policy. In 2005, women's issues and women's advocacy groups played a major role in elections and subsequent policy. In 2009, the political crisis has caused some traditional civil society forces to wane in influence or break apart, while other movements and groups have arisen. As already stated, the youth movement could have a significant influence on the overall outcome. Some NGOs have banded together to demand

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greater transparency or accountability in the wake of the political crisis. And other NGOs organize the domestic elections monitoring coalition. All these changes will have an effect on both the elections outcome and the future of Honduras.

¶19. (C) Regional political and social developments may be more important in the 2009 elections than ever before, especially as they relate to major shifts in voter loyalty or participation, and the effect of the resistance in their geographic areas of strength. Post will endeavor to examine and report on these potential election "hot spots" around the country. Beyond the demographically important departments of Francisco Morazan (Tegucigalpa) and Cortes (San Pedro Sula), Olancho, which is the home base of both Zelaya and Pepe Lobo, and the remote resistance strongholds of Santa Barbara and Copan will be important to watch. While Post has many contacts among the business and political elite of San Pedro Sula, some polling indicates there is a surprising shift in political loyalties among the more populous working class and poor districts of that city, which Post will explore.

¶10. (C) Comment: The social upheaval that accompanied the political crisis in Honduras is almost certain to influence the 2009 elections and the relationship between the United States and our traditional ally. While it is unlikely the winning presidential candidate or dominant party in the Honduran congress will be anything but staunchly pro-American, they will have to face a public that demands greater accountability and a political environment that reflects a broader range of views than ever before. Key policy issues of transnational crime and security, trade, and Honduras's role in the regional debate between democratic principals and the anti-democratic, anti-free market

"Chavist" movement are all at play in these elections. End
Comment.
LLORENS